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Abstract of Bennett

Karen Bennett argues that the problem of causal exclusion, which is that there is nothing around for the mental to cause given the causal completeness of physics, is primarily a claim about overdetermination. She claims that the exclusion problem only arises out of the view that any physical effect that had a sufficient mental cause would be overdetermined and the view that physical effects are not overdetermined like this. Bennett argues that the exclusion problem relies on a tension between the causal efficacy of mental events and properties and this lack of overdetermination. She examines the options that a causal compatibilist might have in refuting the problem of causal exclusion. (A causal compatibilist is one who wishes to hold all of the following: causal completeness, distinctness of the mental and physical, mental causal efficacy, and lack of overdetermination.) Bennett argues that there are two promising options, which I will describe below, for the causal compatibilist to show that sufficient mental and physical causes do not overdetermine their effects. Since the exclusion problem involves the above claim about overdetermination, to argue against overdetermination is to argue against the problem of causal exclusion.

Bennett claims that the compatibilist's burden is to provide a test for whether a given effect is overdetermined. She claims that such a test is indeed available. On a widely accepted account, a given effect is overdetermined only if that effect would still have happened if either of the two causes in question had happened without the other. Two conditionals (O1 and O2) must therefore be true for an effect to be overdetermined. Bennett argues that the compatibilist has two options available: to show that one of the conditionals, as it applies to physical and mental causes, is false or that one is vacuous.

Bennett claims that the only two promising options for the compatibilist are to show that O2 [(p & ~m) □→ e] is false or to show that it is vacuous. She argues that one can show that the claim is false by appealing to possible worlds in which p (e.g. a pattern of neural activity) occurs without a mental property m (e.g. in a petrie dish), and in which e (e.g. raising of a hand) would not occur also.

As for arguing that the claim is vacuous, the compatibilist can claim that "p is not in fact causally sufficient for e." (21) Bennett states that the compatibilist can claim that only p*, which is a complex set of physical properties, rather than p, can be causally sufficient for e. A new conditional becomes the focus of this strategy: (P* & ~M) → e. The difference between p and p* is whatever needs to be added to p to bring about m. But this difference is also the difference that guarantees that e happens also. This was learned through

considerations like the Petri dish example in the falsity strategy. So the new conditional would be true, but vacuously true. It is true that the subject has been changed from the original conditional to the new conditional involving p* rather than p, but this was done for a reason: namely that it is only this sort of property that can necessitate mental ones. So one can only establish a tight connection between m and p*, not between m and p. Both the falsity strategy and the vacuity strategy, Bennett claims, involve the insight that the conditions under which the physical event or property occurs with the mental property or event are the same as those under which the effect e would occur. The only difference is the strictness of the notion of causal sufficiency involved.

Bennett concludes with a series of potential objections to her arguments; namely an objection utilizing the possibility of zombie worlds and the objection that the falsity or vacuity of the conditionals show that the specified test for overdetermination is merely an inadequate test and not that there is no overdetermination. Bennett sets aside the zombie world objection and claims that the second objection is merely terminological.

I have several of my own worries about Bennnett's article: First, Bennett disallows the use of "backtracking" when considering objections to her test for overdetermination. I worry that this is an unjustified move Bennett makes that may prematurely disallow relevant counterexamples to her use of O1 and O2 as the test for overdetermination. Another worry I have is that the use of possible worlds as a means of establishing the falsity or vacuity of OC2 makes overdetermination in the actual world a function of what is logically possible in another world, which seems counterintuitive to me. There also seems to be an ambiguity about the notion of causation in Bennett's firing squad examples. She talks about the firing of the gun being the cause of the effect e, the death of the person shot. However, a number of other potential candidates for the causes of death may be cited (e.g. the bullets' striking the heart, etc). Depending on where we draw the causality line, so to speak, between cause and effect, Bennett's own examples may fall into the category of Backtracking, which she disallows.